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ABSTRACT

The Amish society has retained the essence of rural life and can tell us how this preservation is possible. Originally associated with the Swiss Anabaptists, Amish are often confused with Mennonites because of the early association with Menno Simons. Because the Amish do not make the "prideful" claim of salvation, they are non-evangelical. They maintain folk cohesion and social homogeneity through conscious isolation and the maintenance of a distinct lifestyle ordained by II Corinthians 6:14 which mandates that they not be "unequally yoked together with unbelievers." Thus they use horse and buggy for transportation as cars require licensing and the yoking of self to the "outside." Specific social rules, called the "Ordung," are established by each congregation. The most important rules involve highly visible aspects of social life making deviants obvious. Farming is the preferred occupation, and mutual aid such as barn raising is common. "Work as play" extends to children and is considered a part of their education. The Amish are a reminader that people are gratified when they help others and that available resources may be shared and useful to others. Although a clearcut cross-over does not exist, the Amish provide an example of what might be done by other rural people, especially in their conservative approach to technology, their refusal to rely on the government, their utilization of informal networks within society for mutual aid, and their social adaptiveness, considering the restraints of their religion. (PM)

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AMISH SOCIETY -

IN CELEBRATION OF RURAL STRENGTH AND DIVERSITY

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Amish society - celebration of rural strength and diversity. Any celebration of rural life should aptly include a recognition of the strength and solidarity of the Amish lifestyle. The Amish are strictly a rural people, a group that has retained its rural lifestyle and identification despite the encroachments of the urban, technical world. This paper will describe this way of life, both historically in the Amish emigration from Europe and their adaptations to life in America and in their present style of life. Their rurality will be emphasized, focusing on how they have adjusted to a changing "outside" world, their struggles to keep their separateness, and their strengths that have allowed them to remain a rural, folk society when surrounded by a technical, service-oriented world.

Current study of rural life is essential to understand what will protect rural lifestyles. Population increases with urbanization, the introduction of new industries, and the development of rural resources are just a few of the changes and infringements into rural life. Some of the changes are positive for rural living - new ideas and new resources into rural areas. Some are detrimental as when rural populations have difficulty with these changes and develop new social problems or when they experience exploitation (Denman, 1980:23-25).

Along with the study of rural life is its celebration. The "back-to-nature" movement attests to the appeal of the rural lifestyle with its close roots to the soil and with its generally smaller and more personal social world. The rural lifestyle has its

special strengths. It has its diversity as well. The Amish are but one of many rural ways of life. Theirs is special because of its cultural emphasis on the non-technological, rural style; its social separation; its communal self sufficiency; and its strong values on simplicity and tradition.

This paper will consider what about Amish society has made the retention of rural life possible as well as what Amish society has to tell us about preserving rural life. Many aspects of Amish society can not make an easy transfer into the larger society, even in its rural form. However, commonalities and carryovers exist. Many of the strengths of Amish society stem from its diversity. Some lessons can be taken, despite the cultural differences.

The Amish originated from the Swiss Anabaptists in the 16th century. The Amish, led by Jacob Amman, broke with an Anabaptist group influenced by Menno Simons (from whence the present day Mennonites gained their name) over several practices, including the shunning of excommunicated members. Amman advocated religious and social avoidance of former members of the group (Hostetler, 1971:3). Many Amish congregations still practice forms of shunning by refusing to interact with family members who have broken from the faith.

Today the Amish are often confused with the Mennonites because of the early association with the name Menno Simons and because Amish and Mennonites often live in the same communities and some of the some most socially conservative Mennonites have retained a similar social style - the use of horse and buggy and plain, dark dress, for example. Despite social similarities

between conservative Mennonites and the Amish. theologically they are miles apart. While the Mennonites are evangelical and promote missions across the world, the Amish do not believe in proselytizing (Irwin, 1984:503). The Amish also do not believe that they can have knowledge of their salvation, for this is prideful and is "knowing better than God" (Hostetler, 1980:79). Despite these clearcut religious differences, the Amish are as much socially different from other groups as religiously.

The Amish came to the U.S.A. in two primary waves - 1727-1770 and 1815-1860. They first settled in William Penn's colony, seeking freedom from religious persecutions. They and other religious groups had suffered from extensive persecution in Europe in the 16 and 17th centuries. The oldest Amish settlements are in Pennsylvania (Hostetler, 1980:50-59). In subsequent years, the Amish moved West. Amish settlements are currently found in twenty states; however, three fourths of the Amish live in Pennsylvania, Ohio and Indiana (Hostetler, 1980:100). Curiously, no Amish remain in Europe. The experience of persecution and the concurrent social disruption broke down the Amish groups while the immigration to the USA provided opportunities for group identification and cohesion. Land was available in the new country. The Amish could live in close knit farm communities, maintaining their distinctive, homogeneous and self sufficient communities (Hostetler, 1980:66-71).

The Amish have been called a folk society (Hostetler, 1980:8-13). Redford attributes four characteristics to a folk society - small, isolated, simple and homogeneous (Redford, 1947:297). Typically, each Amish district or congregation consists of thirty to forty

married couples, totally perhaps one hundred or more individuals (Hostetler, 1971:4). Everyone is acquainted with the other members of the congregation on a personal level.

The Amish have consciously isolated themselves through their separate way of life. They may live side by side the non-Amish (called the "English"). However, a clearly distinct lifestyle is maintained (Huntingdon, 1976:299-319). No electricity is permitted in their homes. Their personal transportation is afforded by horse and buggy. Their dress sets them off from the rest of the world - the women with white prayer caps and black bonnets, long dark dresses, and black stockings and the men with straw hats for work and black felt for dress, dark trousers, and a single suspender (stipulations for dress will vary from settlement to settlement. One group might wear no suspenders or two suspenders. Dress serves, as well as the color of the buggy, for example, to identify one settlement from another. These distinctions are sometimes so subtle that they are missed by the outsider). A primary form of social isolation is the use of the Amish dialect, following linguistically an old German dialect. The Amish, then, are not necessarily geographically isolated (though members of a congregation live in close proximity) but socially isolated by their own design.

The description of "simple" seems rather subjective but fits well when reflecting the personal, high context, low technological society of the Amish (Hostetler, 1980:18-21). They are not inundated by television, the war in Lebanon, the introduction of a new computer, or the presidential campaign. Life is less complex because fewer new ideas are introduced and fewer changes

occur. Life is more predictable, albeit not necessarily easier.

The smallness of scale, the isolation, and the simplicity of Amish life offer greater homogeneity (Hostetler, 1980:14). The rigid rules in regard to social mores create a sameness. All members of a congregation share the same social customs. Amish society provides clearcut guidelines as to what is tolerated and what is not. In fact, each congregation has its Ordung, or set of social rules, which is extremely specific as to what is permitted in that congregation (Hostetler, 1971:6). One group split in 1933 from another over the use of a gable overhang, for example. Undoubtedly, there were other social deviations in question but this one precipitated the break (Hostetler, 1980:284). The Ordung is not inflexible. A select group of Amish men meets twice a year to consider modifications. If changed, the revised Ordung is just as specific as the previous one.

The folk society functions to create group cohesion. A strong sense of "our people" and "our way" exists. The most important rules involve highly visible aspects of social life, making deviants obvious. The boundaries between "us" and "them" are clearly maintained. Little fluidity exists between the Amish society and the larger social context (Huntingdon, 1976:307; Hostetler, 1980:14).

The folk society provides a farm based context. All Amish settlements are in rural areas and farming is the preferred occupation. The crunch for land and farms has created stress within the Amish society. Groups of Amish may move to form a new district in an area where land is more available. Amish occupations have spilled over into carpentry, saw millwork, or factory work

if it is available. However, the value of farming remains high and most Amish men who work off the farm strive to buy a farm when they can (Hostetler, 1980:89-90). Even the non-farm Amish families own a horse, with it and their buggy to be their mode of transportation. Both farm and non-farm families have large gardens and raise small livestock. It is not uncommon for even those Amish off the farm to can a thousand or more quarts of fruits and vegetables and to live off their own produce as much as possible. This stems from both economic necessity and the value of a farm base (Irwin, 1984:511).

The farming culture requires long hours and hard work. With the lack of mechanization, the Amish farmer must rely upon large families and on community support at times such as harvest (Hostetler, 1980:15-17, 246). Farms tend to be smaller than the average USA farm, so they can be worked by horse and plow. Mutual aid is common, partly out of economic necessity and the desire for self sufficiency and partly as a statement of the personal relationships among members (Hostetler, 1980:246-248).

Mutual aid might take the form of a barn raising after a fire or storm has destroyed the existing building. Such an activity is called a "frolic" - a term used primarily when men join in aiding a neighbor in a building project. The name connates a dance or picnic more than a work project and illustrates the pleasurable aspects of mutual aid efforts (Hostetler, 1980:246). Quilting bees are also common. Women will contribute their efforts to a neighbor's quilt for free, though the neighbor will sell the quilt later. Of course, that neighbor is happy to help her friends on their quilts as well. Other mutual aid activities include

work bees for church or wedding meal preparations; fund raising through selling lunches at auctions (the profits to be used to support the Amish school); corn husking for the neighboring farmer; and housekeeping for the elderly and infirmed members of the Amish community (Hostetler, 1980:246-248).

Many of the leisure time activities of the Amish involve a form of work and a helping of others. They clearly reflect the folk and farm base of Amish culture, where physical work and helping others are integral parts of life, highly valued by Amish society. Some work, in fact, is seen as a hobby. One Amish woman was overhead asking an "English" man who was remodeling his house if that was his hobby. He, in fact, was not at all enjoying the work and was doing it for possible re-sale and profit. Quilting, her way of making extra money, however, was her hobby. This reflects a common tendency in rural life to make work into play and to gain pleasure from work activities (Hostetler, 1980:15-16).

This "work as play" extends to the Amish children as well. It is common at corn-husking time for youngsters of non-farm Amish families to work long hours after school, helping their farm neighbors free of charge. These youngsters often express the pleasure of work and of helping others. The children are taught at a young age to contribute to the household by cooking, cleaning, gardening, feeding the animals, and supervising the younger children (Hostetler, 1971:18-21). These activities emphasize the practicality of the children's education. Though they learn well the basics such as reading, spelling, and arithmetic, the children are primarily training, both at home and at school, for

the type of life they will lead. Literacy, cooperation and practical skills are emphasized (Hostetler, 1980:173).

The "doing good" for others stems in part from a religious belief that one can not know he is saved and must constantly act in a Christian manner, attempting good works that will hopefully prove his worthiness (Hostetler, 1980:21, 79). The mutual aid and the hard work are also necessities to a culture that strives for societal self sufficiency. This self sufficiency is valued in and of itself, as it might be for any group that desires to make it on its own and especially one with roots of historical perscution by others. For the Amish, self sufficiency has a special significance. Their society dictates that they not be "unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (II Corinthians 6:14) (Hostetler, 1971:5). The Amish may be willing to interact with the "English" on what they see as an equal basis of limited bond - for example, a buyer or seller of goods. They are forbidden to enter into relationships that tie them to outsiders or "non-believers." This dictate explains why the Amish will not own an automobile, telephones or electricity. Each requires a significant bond to an outside institution (the state motor vehicle department and telephone and electric companies) on a clearly unequal (and uncontrollable) basis. To own and drive a car requires licensing, insurance and registration, for example. The Amish might ride in an automobile, borrow a neighbor's phone, or use electricity at work. None of these activities require the yoke of self-ownership (Hostetler, 1980:77-79).

Given this societal principle, self sufficiency takes on special importance. Doing for oneself and for those within one's

own society is essential. The Amish do not necessarily reject technology but the yoke with the larger society that it requires. They must band together and do for each other, to avoid this unequal yoking (Hostetler, 1980:377).

This prohibition is one of the most important principles of Amish society. Another is the homogeneity, in the form of dress, dialect, transportation and other social customs, that creates a great sense of identification with the group. It is not uncommon for an Amish person to refer frequently to "our people" and "our way." The social customs often are less important in and of themselves as the identification and cohesion that result from the conformity (Loomis, 1960:234). Some of the most visible aspects of the culture remain the most clearly dictated aspects of the Ordung. If one clearly demonstrates that he or she identifies with the group, achieved by living the Amish way, one can interact with the larger world with no threat to the Amish community, and thus, to one's own way of life. This helps to explain why an Amish person might shop at Kroger's and utilize the services of the local doctor, obtaining transportation to town from an English neighbor, but adhere strictly to the Amish dress. The rigid boundaries between outsiders and insiders are maintained through the adherence of these visible social rules. The fluidity between cultures that often results in assimilation does not exist. Thus, the Amish society is maintained. Separation, valued in and of itself, serves as a tool for group maintenance (Loomis, 1960:234).

These two principles best illustrate why the Amish way of life is not easily carried over to other rural populations. Others,

though they, too, may be part of a rural, farm based, and folk society, do not adhere to the same religious or social dictates of the Amish - the concern over unequal yoking and the clearcut social rules that create extensive homogeneity. Despite the common value of rural life, other rural people may not be willing or interested in retaining the lifestyle of their forebearers (not that the Amish have totally refused new technology. Most have in-door plumbing and fairly modern washers, though they are run on gasoline rather than electricity). It is difficult for outsiders to even understand why the Amish will use what they will while refusing other aspects of modern life. This behavior is better understood in the context of the social and religious principles of Amish society but still have little appeal to other folk.

Celebration of Amish society fits well into a celebration of rural life. Has it nothing to tell us about rural life in general, nothing to carry over to other rural peoples? The Amish clearly offer a unique way of life. Despite the contrasts culturally, the Amish society does have strengths which can be utilized in a broader context. Four areas of Amish life can be cited: the conservative approach to technology, especially large scale and over extended farming; the refusal to rely upon governmental resources, instead providing communal support in times of need; the provision of mutual aid, utilizing the natural informal networks that exist in Amish society; and the social adaptations, given the peculiar societal restraints of that group of people.

Many rural people, as farmers, have benefited greatly from new technology. The enthusiasm over mechanization, the tendency to believe bigger is better, and over utilization of resources

have sometimes resulted in over investment and subsequent bankruptcy when the market fails. Lack of crop rotation and overplanting create soil depletion and erosion (McCormick, 1984:60-62). The Amish have been careful to farm a manageable size and to farm for the future, saving and replenishing the soil. Their farm size may be smaller due to the limitations of horse and plow. Regardless, they are conscious of what their land and financial resources can manage (Hostetler, 1980:133-135). In a Midwestern Amish community where tractors are permitted due to the larger scale farming, one Amish farmer noted how his people did not go bankrupt during the economic recession because they were reticent to invest in shiny, new equipment. They were cautious and safe about their investments. The Amish do not see "bigger as better" nor do they see more gadgetry as necessary.

The Amish refuse any program or form of aid connected with the government. They recognize the need for a government but desire to limit its authority over the lives of people, especially when it interferes with spiritual dictates. The Amish refuse to run for public office; to serve in military conscription; to settle disputes in court; or to collect social security or public assistance (Hostetler, 1980:251-253). Such a stance on the government is not practical or probably necessary for citizens as a whole. However, it serves as a reminder that heavy reliance on the government, especially in the more distant form of the federal government, can be detrimental to a community. The local population can lose control over its programs and services and can be forced to conform to the guidelines of a particular grant rather than adaptation of the grant to the community ("OMB Issues

Rules," 1984:8). If the support is withdrawn, the community can be left in a bind, especially its own resources were undermined with the implementation of the outside aid. Such aid is often useful and necessary to a rural community with limited resources. However, governmental support should be instituted hand in hand with local planning, to make the best use of the resources of both. Local communities should be aided in developing their own resource base.

Many social programs emphasize the formal networks - the doctor, lawyer, social worker, counselor. These are not always available in sufficient supply in rural areas. They are not always acceptable to rural people who are reticent to deal with such impersonal relationships (Kelly, 1980:131). Informal networks exist in any community but are often under utilized. The Amish style reminds us that people are often gratified when they help others. They sometimes have resources available that they are willing to share and that are useful to others. Total reliance on communal supports, as in Amish society, is not practical in most communities. It may result in a severe drain on resources. However, both personal and economic resources are sometimes overlooked to supplement the other resource systems.

In addition to the mutual aid activities, the Amish desire to care for their own; for example, the Amish rarely place their elderly in nursing homes, even if extremely infirmed, but they provide as much of their care at home as possible (Hostetler, 1980: 170-171). Non-Amish families often wish to do this, too, but require support such as financial help and homemaker aides (Schott, 1980:158). Such supports need to be developed so families and

communities can provide such care themselves.

Amish society is geared toward its particular social and religious principles. The way of life meshes with its cultural dictates. Due to their separation and self sufficiency, the Amish probably have more control over their lifestyle than other groups that are faced with more outside influences. Helpers and planners, as examples of these outside influences, need to act in accord with the cultural demands of that group. These demands are likely to be different (a Navaho Indian tribe or a resident of rural Appalachia) than these of the Amish, but they still exist. Whatever their form, they need to be considered and respected.

In these four areas, the Amish way of life still serves only as a reminder of what might be done for or by other rural people. A clearcut carryover doesn't exist. The Amish society just doesn't fit other rural lifestyles. However, it has its strengths, some of which are similar to other rural populations or can be adapted to fit these communities.

One of its biggest strengths is its diversity. Amish society certainly offers an interesting form of rural life. In its distinctive lifestyle comes that identification of "our people" that solidifies the personal commitment to the Amish way of life and creates the separation necessary to maintain the Amish lifestyle. Hostetler, the foremost expert on Amish life, noted his concern in his 1963 publication (Hostetler, 1963:193-194) over the ability of Amish society to maintain itself against technological encroachments and outside social forces. Over twenty years later (Hostetler, 1980:xi) he experienced surprise over the health of Amish society, as he found the separate lifestyle firmly extrenched. The diversity of Amish society is its primary strength-its source of survival.

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